

A Noble Warrior's Path

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The Buddha was a member of the noble warrior caste. In fact, it's said that of the past seven Buddhas, only one was not a member of the warrior caste. And a warrior sensibility permeates his teachings. You see this with the imagery he uses, comparing a meditator to an archer, a soldier facing an approaching army, even elephants and horses trained in battle. And this sensibility is not just in the imagery. It's in the content as well. The noble eightfold path bears a lot of similarities to the education of a soldier. You learn the right view on how to fight. You learn the right motivation: the resolve to come out victorious, and to do whatever is needed to achieve that end. You have a code of honor on what constitutes right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right mindfulness keeps in mind what you've learned – keeps in mind how to analyze things so you know which tactics to apply when you find yourself face-to-face with the enemy. Mindfulness helps you keep your wits about you. You don't lose your head.

The most important similarity, of course, is that the Buddha's teachings are strategic, just like a soldier's or a warrior's. There's a story in Thai history that the Thais love to tell. Thailand had been conquered by the Burmese and two princes of the Thai royal house were captured and taken to Burma, the idea being that Thailand was going to be a vassal state, so the princes needed to be trained to be good vassals to the Burmese king. While they were living in the palace of the Burmese king, they developed a rivalry with the king's son, the Burmese viceroy. The rivalry came to a head when all three of them were sent out to deal with a bandit with large forces who was holed up in a mountain fortress, plundering the countryside. First the viceroy was placed in charge of the attack against the bandit. His tactic was just to lead a large army up the road on the front of the mountain, but the bandit chief drove the viceroy and his forces back down again. Then it was the turn of the Thai princes, and what they did was to send a small army up the road on the front of the mountain, which drew the armies of the bandit chief down the road. Meanwhile, the princes had led a larger army up the back of the mountain, seized the bandit fortress, and then seized the bandit chief. It's because they thought strategically that they won.

And as we're practicing here, we have to think strategically, too. There's a passage where Ananda talks about three things that the practice is aimed at abandoning—actually, we'll be giving up our *need* for these things as a result of the practice—but we need to *use* them in the meantime. And they parallel the things that you have to provide for soldiers. There's food, there's desire, and there's confidence.

As for food, as Napoleon said, an army has to march on its stomach. But our food here is right concentration, using it to gain a sense of well-being to sustain us along the way. What do you get the sense of well-being from? From the five aggregates. We know that eventually we're going to have to give them up, but first we need to get some use out of them. After all, they do have their uses, so why throw them away? Even though our aim is the Deathless, you have to realize that you can't use the Deathless as a path. You can't use it for anything at all. It's outside of conditioned experience, so it's not a means to anything. That means you have to use the means, the conditioned things, you've got. So you focus on the form of the body; you focus on

the breath, as you feel it. Breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of well-being and ease. Hold the perception of the breath in mind and try to adjust the perception so that it allows you to breathe in a way that's really comfortable. You have to question your perceptions if your breathing feels cramped or tight. Maybe you're perceiving the breath in the wrong way. What other ways can you picture it to yourself? Experiment. And as you're thinking about your breath and evaluating it, that's the aggregate of fabrication. And your consciousness is aware of all of these things. So you've got the five aggregates right here in right concentration, which is an important part of the path. It's your nourishment. Without the well-being and nourishment that come from right concentration, the path gets dry pretty fast.

And as for perceptions of the three characteristics, don't apply them too quickly to what you're doing. There's a passage in the commentaries describing the three characteristics as the Buddha's categorical teaching—in other words, the teaching that's true across the board. But the Buddha didn't treat them that way. There are only two teachings in the whole Canon that he treats as categorical. One is the four noble truths, and the other is the principle that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. Those two teachings are true across the board. The three characteristics, as the Buddha showed, should be applied only in certain times and certain places. There was once a young monk who was asked by a wanderer from another sect what the results of karma were and the monk said, "Stress." Then he went back to the Buddha and asked him if he'd given the right answer and the Buddha said, "No. When asked about karma, you talk about how skillful karma leads to pleasure, how unskillful karma leads to pain." Another one of the other monks piped up and said, "Well, wasn't he thinking about the fact that all feelings are stressful?" And the Buddha replied, essentially, that was not the time or place for that teaching.

So, an important part of strategy is knowing which teachings to use when. And not jumping the gun or trying to skip over things.

When you're practicing concentration, apply the three characteristics or any other type of contemplation that would give rise to dispassion to the things that would pull you out of concentration. But while you're trying to develop the concentration, you don't focus on the fact that the concentration is inconstant because in the very beginning it's all too obviously inconstant. You want to focus on making it as constant and pleasant and under your control as possible. For the time being, you have to push against the three characteristics. Otherwise, you won't have the strength you need to stick with the path.

This is where Ananda's other two factors come in. Soldiers need motivation in order to fight. And the motivation comes down to two things: one is the desire to win, and the other is the confidence that you can. The desire that Ananda talked about here comes from hearing that other people have achieved awakening, so you want that, too. Of course the desire has to be focused properly, not just on the goal but—primarily—on the *means* to the goal. So you focus right here: each breath coming in, each breath going out. Each breath is the next step on your path. It's through developing the path that the goal is found. The path and the goal are not the same thing. But it's by focusing totally on the path right here that the goal will appear right here. So there's an intimate connection between the two. And your desire to take this path to the goal is what keeps you going.

As for the confidence, it's a quality that in Pali is called conceit, *mana*. This doesn't mean being conceited, but it means having the confidence that if other people can do this, they're

human beings, I'm a human being; they can do it, why can't I? This is what gives you the confidence to keep on going, even when the going is tough.

Ultimately we want to get rid of desire and conceit, but we have to use them on the path. If you don't have desire to get to the end of the path, you're just going to lie down on the path. And we know what happens when people lie down on paths. They get trampled or run over. And if you don't have the confidence, you give up even before you've tried. So as a soldier, you need your food. You need your desire, you need your confidence, your conceit. You use these things strategically. That conceit here is a *healthy* sense of self; you want to develop that. The desire is part of right effort. And the food is right concentration.

So all these elements of the path are strategic. You learn to use them when they're appropriate and to put them aside when they're not. When the job is done, you put everything aside. But until you're done, there are things you've got to develop, things you've got to work at. And there are times when it's going to get discouraging. That's when you have to learn how to give yourself good pep talks, to strengthen that sense of confidence, strengthen the sense of desire. When you're feeling weak, look for where you can find food. If you can't get the food of right concentration, learn to develop the food of generosity, the food of virtue. All these things are nourishing to the heart. *Reflection* on your generosity, *reflection* on your virtue helps to give rise to that sense of confidence—and to the sense of honor that we're doing something really noble here.

And it's important to remember that the noble warriors were not just men; there were women noble warriors as well. If you were a woman member of the noble warrior caste, you had to learn a lot of these attitudes, too. You knew the men in the family were going into danger, so you had to learn skills to support them. The women noble warriors were the surgeons – their husbands would come home, their brothers and sons would come home with arrows in them and it was the duty of the women to get the arrows out. So they had to have a fighting spirit, too.

So it's good to remember that the Buddha's knowledge is warrior knowledge, i.e. knowledge of skills to be used in difficult situations so that you can come out victorious. Back in the old days, they made a distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge was just the knowledge of words and definitions. And of course warrior knowledge needs to use words, but it's more concerned with their strategic uses: to train you in skills, to develop your ingenuity, to fire up your fighting spirit, to give you maxims to keep in mind when the going gets tough so that you can approach difficult situations with skill. To keep those words in mind, those instructions in mind, without losing your presence of mind in difficult situations: That's the function of right mindfulness. But in particular, the qualities of right effort and right concentration are your warrior strategies. And it's worth your while to develop them as skills.